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Linguistic and political aspects of alphabet-making for a threatened language

Jan Heegård

Abstract

This paper describes a situation where a native speaker of a threatened language, Kalashamon, has developed an alphabet for his language in order to make it resistant to a heavily expanding neighbouring language and culture. After a linguistic characterization of the alphabet I will present some of the sociocultural or political circumstances that lie behind the alphabet project. And it will come clear why this specific situation in reality is far from being an ideal situation as concerns the working for the survival of a threatened language as described by e.g. England (Hale et al. 1992).

1.Introduction

During our field work[1] among the Kalasha in the Chitral District in North West Pakistan a local school teacher, Mr. Ingineer Khan, showed and explained to us an alphabet for Kalashamon, the language of the Kalasha, that he had developed himself and which was planned to serve as the written medium for Kalashamon. Besides from being a quick and most valuable introduction to the complex sound system of Kalashamon the alphabet

project gave us an insight into those linguistic and political factors that are involved in constructing an alphabet for an unwritten language.

The aim of this paper is to give a brief presentation of these two different sorts of factors. As concerns the linguistic aspect I will show which features and characteristics of other alphabets Ingineer Khan has found convenient also to be present in the Kalashamon alphabet. As concerns the political aspect I will show why any effort for the survival of this threatened language is a rather touchy matter.[2]

2. The sound system

Before we take a closer look at the alphabet it will be useful to have an idea of what the sound system looks like.

Kalashamon has five distinctive vowel qualities and with the addition of distinctive nasalization and retroflexion, marked with ~ and _, respectively, the vowel system becomes extensive:

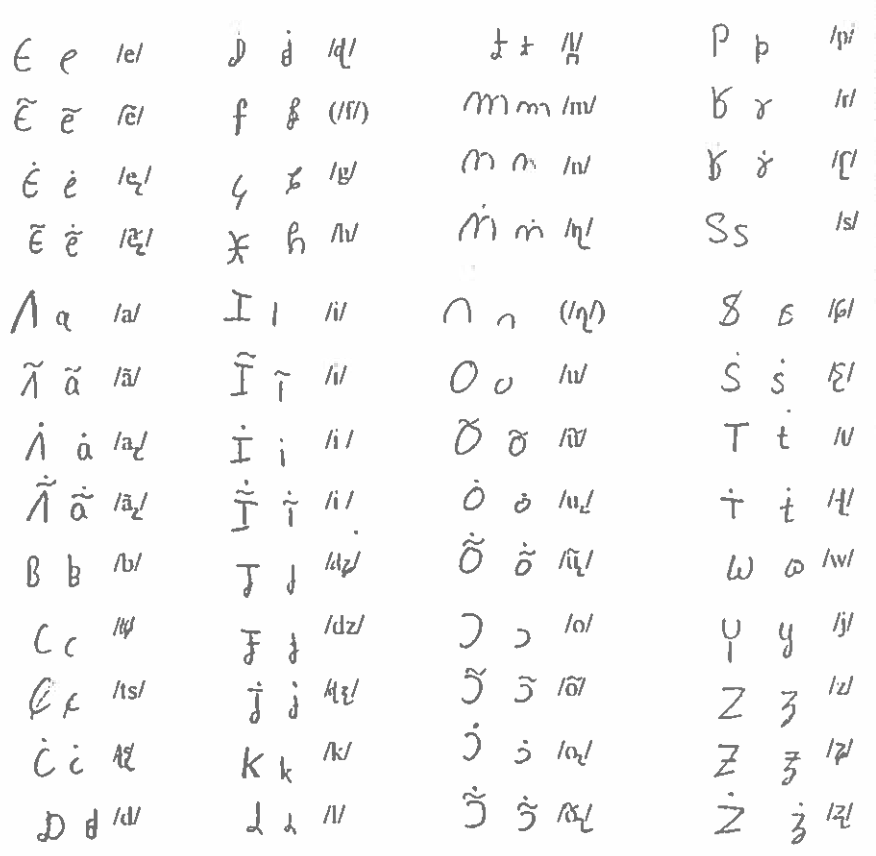
(1)	/i, ĩ, i̙, ĩ̙/		/u, ũ, u̙, ũ̙/
	/e, ẽ, e̙, ẽ̙/		/o, õ, o̙, õ̙/
		/a, ã, a̙, ã̙/	
	Diphtongs:	/aj, aw, ow/	

The number of consonant phonemes is large, especially as regards the affricates and the stops with four manners and four places of articulation. The phonemic status of ũ and _ can be questioned.

(2)	Lab.	Dent.	Alv-pal.	Retro.	Pal.	Vel.	Pharyng.
Stops	p	t		ʈ		k	
	ph	th		ʈʰ		kh	
	b	d		ɖʰ		g	
	bh	dh		ɖʰ		gh	
Affricates		ts	tɕ	tʂ			
		tsh	tɕh	tʂh			
		dz	dʑ	ɖʐ			
			dʑh				
Frikatives		s	ɕ	ʂ			h
		z	ʑ	ʐ			
Nasals	m	n	(ɲ)	ɳ		(ŋ)	
Liquids			r		ɽ[3]		
		ɭ	l				
Glides	w				j		

3. Graphic description of the alphabet

Below I have copied Ingineer Khan's alphabet by hand, to be read column by column, and I have given the phonemic value that each letter represents.



With its specific features and close connection to English, the Kalashamon alphabet appears as a mixture of something unique yet something traditional and familiar. On certain points it is even more coherent graphically than English orthography, i.e. certain letters resemble each other because they represent sounds that are alike. Several features makes the Kalashamon

alphabet different from English orthography but only a few will be mentioned here:

a)The use of ~ for nasal vowels and the dot for retroflexion is fully consistent. Notice that the dot above small <i> and small <j> for that reason is missing.

b) <h> alone represents /h/, and together with letters that represent stops and affricates <h> marks aspiration, e.g. <ph> for /ph/, <bh> for /bh/ etc.

c)Among the affricates it is the letter that represents the palatal sound that is the basic letter. Among the sibilants it is letter that represents the dental sound. The reason for this apparent inconsistency might be found in the sounds that the letters represent in English. <s> represents [s], not the palatal [ʃ], which is written <sh>. But because Ingineer Khan consistently uses <h> for aspiration he is left with <s> for the representation of a dental sound and with a modified <s> for /ɕ /. <c> in English orthography represents in some positions a palatal consonant, and so in Kalashamon. And therefore the dental affricate [ts], which English does not have, is a modified version of <c>.

4. The alphabet as a representation of the sound system

Generally, the alphabet follows the principle of one grapheme for one phoneme. If we ignore the digraphic representation of the aspirated sounds there are only few deviations of which two will be mentioned here. (Cf. Heegaard 1996 for others.)

4.1 Representation of regular phonetic assimilation

Some words in Ingineer Khan's way of writing show use of both a morphophonemic and a surface phonetic principle, as shown below (LOC = locative case).

(3)	< >	[ ]	/ /
'branch'	çoŋg	çoŋ	‘çong
'pear'	toŋg	‘toŋ	‘tong
'hat'	kaşoŋg	ka‘şoŋ	ka‘şong
'horn'		‘şiŋ	‘şing
'horn-LOC'		‘şiŋguna	
'cloud'		‘meɲ	‘mentç
'cloud-LOC'		‘meɲtçuna	

According to a rule of assimilation a nasal consonant changes its place of articulation according to a succeeding stop or affricate. Another rule applies in word final position where no consonant groups are allowed and therefore

the last consonant or consonants are dropped in the pronunciation. This give us pronunciations with a velar nasal as in the words in (3) which have an underlying phonemic structure with a final velar stop. This final stop is realized by suffixation, as seen in the words for 'horn' and 'cloud' in the locative cases. Therefore the use of the letter <ŋ> in the first three words in (3) appears to be a phonetic way of writing. And the use of the letter <g> in the same words is a morphophonemic feature.

4.2 Representation of vowel length

A complex feature of Kalashamon phonology is vowel length. In all but one syllable type vowel length is not phonemically distinctive. But in stressed, open, and non-final syllable we find a complex distributional pattern because: a) in one group of words the vowel is always short; b) in another group of words the vowel is always long or near-long; c) in a third group of words the vowel can be either short or long. The difference between a long and a short vowel is exploited in three different ways. (Cf. Heegaard and Mørch 1997, and Heegaard (in press) for a closer description and possible explanations to the distributional pattern of vowel length.) This distribution is exemplified with the near-minimal pairs in (4) below:

(4) a) 'lie on one's side'	*ka'paṭṣa hik*	vs.	b) 'small feather'	*pa:ṭṣak*
a) 'cold'	*tra'mona*	vs.	b) 'leather bag'	*'mo:ni*
a) 'walnut bread'	*bi'lili*	vs.	c) 'ant'	*pi'li:lak, pi'lilak*
a) 'him over there'	*'ạla*	vs.	c) 'pumpkin	*'a:luk, ' aluk*

The complicated pattern of vowel length is also reflected in some of Ingineer Khan's word examples to the alphabet. The four first words in (5) below can all be pronounced with a short or a long vowel (classified as 'c' above), but they are written with one vowel letter only. So is the word for 'brother', although it only has a long vowel (classified as 'b' above).

(5)	<>	[ ]
'day'	adu	a:du, adu
'mother'	aja	'a:ja, 'aja
'grandfather'	wawa	'wa:a, 'wawa
'grandmother'	awa	'a:wa, 'awa
'brother'	baja	'ba:ja

The words in (6) below further illustrates the complex situation:

(6)	<>	[ ]
'owl'	uuhuk	u'huk
'Prop.'	kanḍ uurik	kaṇ'ḍurik
'lamp'	laṭeṇ	la'ṭe:ṇ, laṭeṇ
'poison'	ẓar	ẓa:r, ar
'lentils'	dal	da:l, dal
'man's sister-in-law'	bahuu	ba'hu:, ba'hu

In the first two words we have never heard a long vowel but Ingineer Khan writes them as such. In the four other words vowel length varies freely but Ingineer Khan writes them differently: with a short vowel in the words for 'lamp, poison' and 'lentils' and with a long vowel in 'man's sister-in-law'. Altogether the words in (5)-(6) show that Ingineer Khan is uncertain about how to represent vowel length orthographically, a reflection of the complex distributinal pattern of vowel length.

4.3 Remarks on the uncertainties

It is worth noticing that these uncertainties and deviations from the otherwise strict phonemic principle used by Ingineer Khan concern the same parts of the sound system that according to Heegaard and Mørch (1997) are most problematic. It should, however, in that respect be taken into consideration that Ingineer Khan's primary inspiration, Latin alphabet/English orthography neither differentiates between e.g. oral and nasal vowels, nor unambiguously differentiates between long and short vowels.

The use of <ŋ> is worth noticing. We saw above that Ingineer Khan has a good intuition of feature analysis, e.g. as shown with the consistent marking of nasal vowels and retroflexion. This well-developed sense of

systematizing and feature analysis could have forced him to use a letter for a velar nasal consonant: the stops have four different places of articulation, so must the nasals have. The use of <ŋ> in his alphabet could also be due to influence from Urdu orthography. Corresponding to the Urdu way of writing nasal vowel, with a vowel symbol followed by naam, ں, Ingineer Khan also have examples of <Vŋ>, side by side with the use of <V̈> for the representation of a nasal vowel.

An explanation of the uncertainties as regards vowel length could be that Ingineer Khan does not regård vowel length as salient cognitively as the segmental features, the vowel and consonant phonemes, but rather regard it as a sort of prosody that works in accordance with stress which he does not mark. In his book *Writing Systems* from 1987 Geoffrey Sampson expresses similar ideas:

(7) "It is tempting to speculate that contrasts of phonological length (and perhaps suprasegmental contrasts in general) may simply be less noticeable than segmental contrasts to speakers of languages which include them" ... "I suggest that scripts commonly ignore contrasts of length, because they are perceptually less salient than, for instance, vowel quality". (Sampson 1987: 132-133.)

Before one starts speculations about how cognitively salient certain phonological contrasts and prosodic phenomena are for Ingineer Khan one

should remember that the orthography is in its experimental stage. It would have been more surprising if Ingineer Khan had not faced such problems that I have mentioned. All in all, I think that Ingineer Khan, from a graphic and linguistic point of view, has created a well thought out and solid alphabet. But however well done, linguistic work on language planning cannot separate itself from political and cultural attitudes, as will become clear below.

5.Sociocultural Aspects

It is in light of the cultural and religious threat described in Mørch (this volume) that one should see Ingineer Khan's effort to make Kalashamon a written language. In an interview Mørch and I made with him during our first stay in Chitral, he gave the following arguments for creating an alphabet:

(1) "The Kalash people were isolated before, nobody [: no Kho people] were in the valleys and no language were introduced. [Now] many people have come into the valleys. So as the Kalash culture the language is also on the way to disappear. So if we can write it the next generations can get help. If you will not work on a language then the language will die" (in Heegaard 1996).

It is thus clear that Kalashamon is becoming a written language as a part of a struggle for the survival of the Kalasha culture. It is Ingineer Khan's intention to give the Kalasha the cultural prestige that an orthography can give and that no other language but Khowar has in the multilingual and multicultural district of Chitral. Because the alphabet is based on the Latin or English alphabets and not on a variety of Arabic script the Kalash could show to the rest of the world that they are different from the other (Muslim) tribes in the area. Furthermore, in choosing the Latin alphabet as the model the Kalashamon alphabet can serve as a transitional orthography to e.g. English, and not to Urdu, the other national (and Islam oriented) language of Pakistan.

With his position as a school teacher in one of the few Kalasha schools that have been established recently and with the support of the other school teachers one might think that Ingineer Khan has a good opportunity to fulfill his intentions. But the following citation from a paper given by another prominent Kalasha at an international conference in 1995 shows that not everybody agrees with Ingineer Khan:

(10) "[Some people] think that our language is going to die [and] want to make schools and school books for us in Kalasha. But this language, we speak it all the time. We don't need to be taught what we already know!" (Saifullah Jan 1995ms).

This controversy between two prominent members of the society is even more intriguing because they belong to two different lineages that for decades have been in conflict with each other.

Not only does Ingineer Khan have to take up the dispute with a fellow Kalasha. He also has to convince missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics that they should give up their Urdu based alphabet. An alphabet that they have created in their efforts to make Kalashamon a written language in the first place, and in the second place to translate the Bible and christianize the Kalasha and in that way, according to their conviction, make the Kalasha more capable of resisting the ungoing muslim pressure.

6. Concluding remarks

That part of language planning which deal with the implementation of an orthography for the Kalasha is for the reasons mentioned in the foregoing at the moment a rather complicated and sensitive matter. The linguist, or any other well-meaning outsider, cannot avoid taking the position of one of the striding parts if he should work or fight for the its survival. However, with

the linguistic work almost solved and finished Ingineer Khan can now start

working on the important political aspect.

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Notes

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2. Cf. Mørch (this volume) for a presentation of the sociolinguistic scenario of the Kalasha.

3. /ʂ/ is only found in one of the still spoken dialects.

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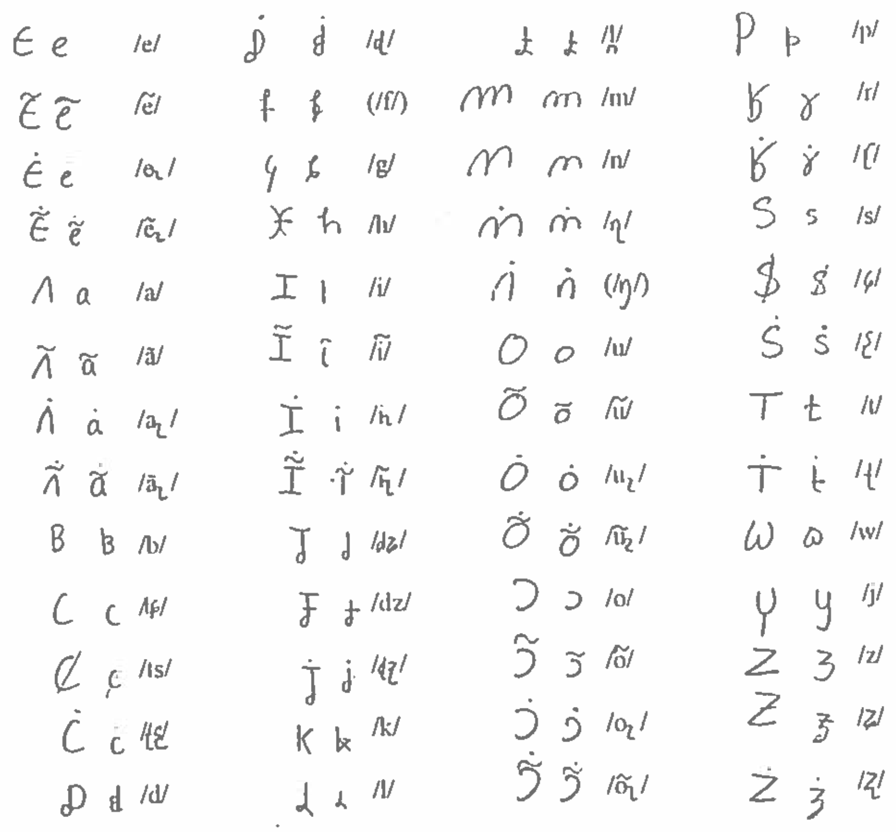

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